

The Gift of Prophecy

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1Co 13:2 And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

Rom 12:6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, *let us prophesy* according to the proportion of faith;

Prophecy, as a gift, seems to be very neglected in our day. I assume that this is because of the terror that the cessationists have toward anything that smacks of supernaturalism. And then there is their defective understanding of the completion of the sacred canon as something which limits any possibility of God directly communicating with, through or to individuals. Then there is the problem with their definition of the word as meaning “forth telling” not “fore telling”. These false notions have done their share to hinder a correct understanding of the doctrine of prophecy, but as with any other Biblical concept, we have to believe that the truth is liberating when it comes to errors which we may have held in the past. “*Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (Jn. 8: 32). We do not have to be held in the grips of falsehood when we have the holy Spirit as our teacher (1Jn. 2: 20, 27; 1Cor. 2: 10, 12).

Before we begin this study, I would like to make some simple observations on the two verses which I have chosen as texts for the basis of this study.

1. Prophecy is called a gift. “*Though I have the gift of prophecy*”... “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us*”. A gift is not a natural trait. It is a supernatural bestowment. Gifts are not earned. Nor are the learned. They are never the product of human production (the flesh). They are always the product of Divine “Grace”.

2. Only some people have this gift. Our gifts are said to vary from individual to individual. Notice the word “*differing*”. If everyone had the same gifts then everyone would have the same function. But we know from Paul’s clear teaching on the “body” that not everyone is an ear. Not everyone is a toe. Not everyone is a hand. We all have different gifts. Don’t look to find a large group of people in each church having the same gift. Such an expectation is inconsistent with the clear teaching that the Lord bestows the gifts as He deems necessary. This is one of the reasons I reject the “matic and costal” view that all Christians should speak in tongues. That is blatantly false, and is totally inconsistent with idea of Sovereign Administration concerning the gifts. God plainly does not want us all to be tongues, or ears. “*But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body?*” (1Cor. 12: 18-19).

3. The gift of prophecy is a revelational gift. Paul says that it includes understanding mysteries and knowledge. *“I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge.”* There are different ways to classify the gifts but dividing them into revelational and non-revelational is a simple way to distinguish the different gifts. Faith for instance is a gift for strengthening the body, and it does not involve the revealing of mysteries or hidden knowledge, so we consider it non-revelational. Teaching is a similar gift and is primarily educational and non-revelational. It does not bring new revelation but teaches about what has already been revealed. Tongues, however, is an example of another revelational gift. *“In the spirit he speaketh mysteries” (1Cor. 14: 2).* This is why it requires the complementary gift of *“interpretation of tongues” (1Cor. 12: 10).* The revelational gifts bring hidden knowledge and mysteries to light.

4. Gift Subordination. I will be talking about this concept in depth later on in these studies. Certain gifts are to be subordinate to other gifts. Tongues, for instance, is subordinate to the gift of interpretation of tongues. *“But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God” (1Cor. 14: 28).* Thus the tongues speaker is commanded to be in silence in the absence of an interpreter. Tongues are also subordinate to the gift of “teaching”. *“Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue (1Cor. 14: 19).* It is preferable to teach in five words than to babble 10,000 words in an unknown tongue. This seems to make tongues a relatively unimportant gift. While it does have some genuine value, it is none the less severely restricted and subordinated by the Apostle Paul, who himself was a tongues practitioner (1Cor. 14: 18). Tongues are the most heavily regulated and subordinated of all the gifts, because they are so easily abused and faked. Fake tongues are evident all over the place in today’s evangelical churches. They need to be regulated and subordinated because *“God is not the author of confusion” (1Cor. 14: 33).* Tongues are also subordinate to prophecy. *“I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying” (1Cor. 14: 5).*

Prophecy is subordinate to “the prophets”. *“And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1Cor. 14: 32).* All the gifts are subordinate to “Love”. *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1Cor. 13: 1).* This immediately follows the verse where Paul states the superiority of Love as the preeminent gift. *“But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way” (1Cor. 12: 31).* The more excellent way is the way of charity, the way of chapter 13.

Why The Gift Of Prophecy is Not Just Forth-telling

Most of the cessationists, who deny the validity of this gift or today, try to get around the difficulty of their awkward position by redefining the term “prophecy“. Instead of allowing it to mean the same thing that it has meant from the earliest ages of the Old Testament, right through the entire Biblical history; they redefine it, and say that while it used to include “fore-telling”, it now only means “forth-telling” i.e. “forth-telling”, as when a preacher tells forth the gospel message. According to this view prophecy no longer includes any concept of “revelation” but only concepts of “illumination”.

By making the gift of prophecy to mean forth-telling, these cessationists effectively remove it as a separate gift and say that it is really nothing more than the gift of being a pastor. But can this be sustained from scripture? No it cannot!

Look at 1Cor. 12: 28 *“And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues”*. Notice that the gift of prophets is mentioned second, right after the gift of “Apostles”. After that is mentioned the gift of “teachers”. There is clearly a difference between a “prophet” and a “teacher”. The difference is that the gift of “prophet” is a gift of “revelation” to the church, but a teacher is a gift of “illumination”. Strictly speaking a “teacher” is a “forth-teller”, and is therefore distinguished from a “prophet”. So in this concept “forth-telling” has virtually nothing whatsoever to do with “prophets” and is really a “teaching” gift. This proves that the cessationists definition of “prophet” is wrong because what they are really defining is a “teacher”.

The same concept is even more pronounced in Ephesians 4: 11-12: *“And he gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ”*. In this passage, evangelists and then pastor/teachers are listed behind apostles and prophets. Apostles and prophets are once again “revelatory” gifts, (and this includes but is not limited to “fore-telling”), while evangelists and pastor/teachers are “forth-tellers” or illuminatory gifts. So this passage also makes the cessationists definition impossible, because the prophets are clearly separate and distinct from the “forth-tellers” who are the “evangelists and pastor/teachers. While the cessationist is trying to eliminate what they perceive to be a problem, they are in reality creating a worse problem.

Acts 15: 32 mentions two men by name and calls them “prophets”. *“And Judas and Silas, being themselves also prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them”*. This is important because neither of these men were “apostles”, but they were “prophets”. It also states one of the unique functions of a prophet. They “confirmed” the brethren. This word, and variations

of it, are used to indicate that part of the prophets work was to set God's people on a firm foundation. The word is translated by the words "establish and confirm" (Acts 15: 41; 1Thess. 3: 2; 1Pet. 5: 10). There is something about the gift of prophet that foundationalizes and stabilizes the church of God. They are integral *"for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"* (Eph. 4: 12). This gift can never be done away with for this very reason. The church is *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets"* (Eph. 2: 20). This verse does not mean that once the foundation was laid there was no more need for "the apostles and prophets". That sort of interpretation actually removes the continued foundation from under the church. It is because the apostles and prophet are foundational that their function remains in the church (I will discuss the current function of the Apostles¹ in a different lesson, for now we are talking about prophets).

Prophets are not Apostles

This point, that the prophets are not apostles may at first seem to be superfluous, but it is actually very important. While the apostles had gifts of prophecy, they were not properly considered to be just prophets. They occupied a distinct office from the prophets, and the prophets distinct from them. This is an important distinction because the cessationists believe that the office ceased when the last apostle, John (who was also a prophet), died. But that the office of prophet is really distinct from the apostles, and cannot be lumped together with them, is clear from the many passages where they are mentioned without the apostles. We have already mentioned the two prophets in Acts 15: 32, but there is also the important case in Acts 11: 26-28. *"And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar"*. This case is important because it shows not only that there were prophets, who were distinct from the apostles, but that one of them, named Agabus made a prediction about a famine which we are told *"came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar"*. This clearly establishes a predictive "fore-telling" aspect in the work of the prophets.

Prediction by prophets does not mean that their revelations have to be part of scripture. In this case the revelation is mentioned, but it is not inscripturated. While many prophetic words have been inscripturated into the Bible, not all of them have. Prophecy can be on the same level as the inspired word of God, but it is not always on that level. Since the Bible is complete, we should not expect the words of modern prophets to be inscripturated, but we should still expect

¹ The office of apostle continues in the church without the physical presence of apostles. They fulfill their office in heaven where they have been removed. (Matt. 19: 28; Lk 22: 30; Rev. 4: 4; Rev. 11: 16; Rev. 20: 4). But prophets remain on the earth.

them to be true words from God. Their words are to be tested. Prophetic words are tested with the words of scripture in Acts 15: 15, 1Cor. 14: 29,32, and 1Jn. 4: 1.

Prophets Reveal the Will of The Holy Spirit!

More prophets are mentioned by name in Acts 13. This is an important passage, because the ministry of these prophets is clearly equated with the discerning of the will of God by direct revelation. We are told how all this worked in very clear terms. *“Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus“* (Acts 13: 1-4). Notice that these prophets were not apostles, but as they *“ministered to the Lord”*, The Holy Ghost spoke and *“said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them”*. If these words had not been directly communicated through the ministry of these prophets, the church would have had no way of discerning what the Holy Spirit wanted to do in this important matter of the ordination of Saul and Barnabas. The discernment of God’s will came through the agency of these prophets. This method of discerning God’s will is extra-Biblical, but it is certainly not un-Biblical. This was not something that they read out of the pages of the Bible. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets ministry. This was clearly direct revelation without inscripturization. When it was done, it says that they *“being sent forth by the Holy Ghost”* thus accomplished the perfect will of God in this regard. It was the Holy Ghost that sent them forth, and He did it by the direct ministry of these prophets.

This is very important because it teaches us that there are times and circumstances where discerning the will of God is not simply a matter of finding a verse of Scripture to lead you. This will seem controversial to some of you, because you do not yet understand that it is the function of the Holy Spirit to guide His people into all truth (Jn. 16: 13; Jn 14: 26; 1Cor. 2: 10-13; 1Jn.2: 20,27). If you look up these verses, as I trust you will do, you will find that not one of them mentions the Holy Spirit guiding you to Scripture passages which might be appropriate to the circumstances. The Holy Spirit is not an **“indwelling concordance”**, He is the Third Person of the Triune God. He is quite capable of imparting whatever knowledge He wants us to have through the gifts He has given. He is the **“Indwelling God”**. The fact is that *“He gave some apostles, and some prophets...for the edification of the body of Christ”*. Let it alone. Don’t disturb it. This is wonderful. It is marvelous. It is true. Prophets constitute a necessary function of the Holy Spirit to the church.

They reveal the truth where there are no verses!

Prophets Always Submit to the Scriptures

It might sound like we are denigrating the importance of the infallible and inerrant word of God when we say that Prophets give us the revealed will of God where there are no verses. The voice of prophecy is extra-Biblical but not un-Biblical. This is in no way a statement to diminish the importance of the Bible. We believe that it is the sufficient rule of faith and practice, as it says in the Baptist Confession 1689, and the Westminster confession. Paul says to the prophets: *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues” (1Cor 14: 37-39).*

Three important things are said to the prophets and also to the spiritual leaders in the church in this passage.

- 1) They must acknowledge that the Scriptures (apostolic writings) are the commandments of God. This implies total submission to the written word by the spoken word. A prophet cannot speak something that is contrary to the commandments of God. The Bible always takes precedence.
- 2). Prophecy is to be coveted. It is not a gift which has passed away, and it is not a gift of little importance. While it is direct revelation, it is never contrary to the word of God. It appears from all the verses we have considered that prophecy is the second most important office in the church of Jesus Christ. Only Apostleship is higher. It is a gift to be desired and coveted. This is also indicated in 1Cor. 14: 1, 5 and 1Cor. 12: 31. Paul say's: *“Despise not prophesying” (1thess. 5: 20).* That verse alone, should be sufficient to settle any and all questions about the validity and continued function of prophecy in the church.
- 3). Forbid not to speak in tongues. This follows directly on the heels of the words *“covet to prophesy”*. That is because tongues is another “revelatory” gift of the Holy Spirit. These gifts are put together because they constitute direct revelations from God. This makes them extremely important. Even though Paul tends to down play the importance of the gift of tongues, because it tends to be showy and easily faked; he makes it clear that we are never to forbid or restrict the proper use of this gift.

Prophecy is one of the Miraculous Gifts

1Co 12:8-10 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another *divers* kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:

1Ti 1:18 This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare;

Prophecies are connected with and related to the other miraculous gifts. It is right alongside healing, working of miracles and tongues. This means that we should understand this when it is evident that the gift is operational. That is why Paul reminded Timothy of the prophecies which were uttered in connection with his ministry. Paul says' that they were "*the prophecies which went before on thee*". He is reminding Timothy, that prophecies were given (we do not have a written record of them because they were not inscripturated), which had been fulfilled in his case, and that the whole affair was the doing of the Lord. The prophecies were miraculous revelations ahead of time about what God was going to do in and through Timothy. Prophecy somehow links up with the absolute Sovereign Plan and Providence of God, and it miraculously reaches fulfillment.

We must be careful to distinguish prophecy from any natural or latent abilities in men. There are people who evidence certain degrees of natural psychic abilities. These abilities may be latent natural abilities of the soul, or they may be demonically influenced and inspired. I believe that both types of psychic phenomenon exists. But these abilities, such as a fortune teller might have, are in no way comparable to, or equal to the Divine gift of prophecy. Prophecy is not a hunch, a guess, or even a premonition. It is not reading the thoughts of another person. It is not a vibrational psychic event. It is not looking into a crystal ball. It is not analyzing somebody's aura. It is not psycho kinesis. It is not necromancy. It is not channeling a spirit or demon. It is not magic. It is a miracle. It is in fact a very high order of miracle...right up there with raising the dead. It is a Sovereignly deployed gift. It can never be wrong. It is absolute truth, in all cases. It not only has the ability to tell future events with perfect accuracy, but it makes known the absolute true will of God in all situations of which it is speaking. Prophecy is God speaking and not men. That's what makes it miraculous.

God does not Speak in King James English!

By way of observation, I would point out that for a prophet to stand up in church today and use the words "Thus saith the Lord", is a bit precocious and spurious. If he is telling the words of the Lord, those words will be recognized without an Elizabethan introduction by the prophet. We do not speak that way, and God does not speak that way either. I tend to disbelieve anybody who say's He's a prophet, but who does not speak in plain modern day language. The true prophets in the Bible always delivered God's message in the plainest, clearest, most commonly understood vernacular of the everyday people to whom their prophecies were addressed. God does not speak in King James English. He is God. He has complete mastery over every language that has ever been spoken, and if He wants to speak to people He is quite capable of doing it in their

vernacular and even their very dialect. I have the same thoughts about people who claim to be interpreting tongues but who speak King James English. To me that's a sure sign that something is phony, and no real gift is being evidenced at all. When God speaks, He speaks in the vernacular of the people. That's why He wrote the New Testament in Koiné Greek. Koiné was the common man's Greek, unlike Classical Greek which was the language of the philosophers and poets.

Of course I might be criticized for what I have just said, based on the idea that if God has complete mastery over every language, and always delivers His messages in the clearest language possible, then why on earth would he choose to give people the gift of tongues, which is unintelligible without the aid of special interpretation? That doesn't quite seem to make any sense, does it? Actually it is a very important question. I'm glad I asked it. It gives me the opportunity to explain the miracle of tongues a bit. I know that this is all about prophecy, and that I pretty much said that King James or Elizabethan English is alright for Shakespeare, but not for a prophet or tongues interpreter in the church. Archaic language is never how God speaks. So why does He speak through tongues? He obviously does not need to. But according to the New Testament He does use this method. The answer is threefold:

1) God speak through tongues because at least three gifts are operational in tongues...

A. Glossa, which is the language unintelligible to some, but not unintelligible in fact. All tongues is intelligible with interpretation or hearing in another language.

B. Hearers hearing in a known language which the person speaking has never learned (note: Acts 2: 6). People hear sometimes in foreign languages, even though the gift might be an Angelic tongue. Part of the miracle of tongues is in the hearing. It might sound like a babble to you, but God can make it sound like Spanish or French or Russian or Chinese. Tongues is always multilinguistic speech. Tongues can always communicate in any language under the sun. If God intends to speak to someone who is of a different native tongue, He can do it very easily with Tongues. All true tongues is multilinguistic speech. That is why Paul mentioned that when he spoke in tongues it was simultaneously "*the tongues of men and of angels*" (1Cor 13: 1). Paul is not saying that there are two different gifts of tongues... "Human tongues" and a different gift of "Angelic tongues". That is not what he is saying at all. What he is saying is that when the gift is operating, it is human tongues and angelic tongues at the same time. This is why the gift is almost always mentioned in the plural. It is a gift of "tongues" (plural), not a gift of "a tongue". It is multilinguistic and includes every known human tongue and every angelic tongue at the same time. This is part of the miracle. This gift is most likely related to the one true original language which was spoken before the tower of Babel judgment. It is presumed that this is the language of heaven, because there will be people there from "every nation and people and kindred and tongue" (Rev. 5: 9). Their tongues are mentioned because the language of heaven is multilinguistic speech.

C). There must always be at least one interpretation. I see no reason why there

can't be more interpretations, but one is the minimum. In Acts 2 it appears that the interpreting was going on simultaneously with the tongues that were being spoken, because as the tongues were spoken the men had complete understanding in at least 16 different languages: *"And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God"* (Acts 2: 8-11). anything specific about interpretation, but it can be assumed based on other passages of the New Testament. Interpretation occurs every time the true gift is employed in a corporate worship setting. (Note interpretation is not necessary in self-edificatory tongues (1Cor. 14: 4), that take place outside of church or when praying in tongues (1Cor. 14: 14)).

2). God speaks through tongues because it glorifies Him. All miracles are designed to glorify God. They are not given for human entertainment, or to magnify any individual. Prophecy does not magnify the prophet, or make him popular. That's why so many of them were killed. Neither does tongues magnify a person. Actually tongues is a humiliating gift, that looks and sounds quite ridiculous. In Acts they thought the tongues speakers were mad or drunk. *"But others mocking said, They are filled with new wine"* (Acts 2: 13). If you want to be ridiculed and humiliated...Speak In Tongues! They will think you are mad (1Cor. 14: 23). True tongues does not glorify the giftees it glorifies only the Gifto. This particular gift is especially glorifying to the Holy Spirit Himself, because He is unseen and misunderstood. This gift shows His tremendous power and His infinite knowledge. He knows and speaks in all languages at once! Show me any man who can do that! Speaking in tongues clearly glorifies God and not man.

3. God speaks through tongues because He chooses to speak that way. It is really not up to us to ever ask, why does God do this, or why does God do that. The original question here was "If God can speak perfect English, then why does He give the gift of tongues?" He obviously does not need to communicate in such an obtuse way. These kinds of questions are akin to hypothetical questions. They really have no meaning whatsoever. God can communicate any way He chooses to communicate. From the Bible we learn that He has chosen to display this miraculous gift of tongues, and also the miracle of prophetic utterance. Asking why He does it is almost blasphemous. He does it because He wants to do it. But saying that He cannot do it is not "almost blasphemous". It is "totally blasphemous". I would rather see you doubt whether or not God does certain things, then to hear you say or think that He cannot do certain things which He has obviously designed to do. God can do whatever He deems necessary. Don't ever say that He cannot. That's why Paul says: *"forbid not to speak with tongues"* (1Cor. 14: 39).

Well, I did not plan on spending so much time speaking about tongues, but the concepts discussed apply equally as well to the miracle of prophecy. Please try

to always honor God in your thinking about His Sovereign Administration of all things, including the miraculous gifts. May He be praised.